

Bubble Girl by cosmilk

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Summary:

"El was just looking for a reason not to tell him, because she would never dare to tell him her true feelings. But it looked like a gum changed this."

OR

The time El asked for a piece of gum and she had to tell who's her crush in return.

Bubble Girl

Author's Note:

Hey everyone!

It's nearly midnight and I just finished this but I really wanted to publish it as I haven't posted in weeks! I'm sorry about that, I tried to write a bit while I was in Japan but I really had really long days there (woke up early, went to bed late), which I do not regret at all, it's really a great country I'd love to return to, a week wasn't enough!

I may not publish in a while because as I said it before, I have the baccalaureate in a bit more than a month and I did not study yet????? I also have oral exams that are a part of the baccalaureate in the following weeks and I did not prepare anything yet lol I'm in deep sh*t.

I'm saying all this but I know I'll still try to find time to write and update Lost in Translation.

As you may have guessed or read, this one-shot is based on a tumblr prompt. Here's the link. <http://otpprompts.tumblr.com/post/168694991799/high-school-or-college-person-a-asks-for-gum>

This just really inspired me and I really enjoyed writing it. I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I do.

I hope there aren't too many typos or mistakes, even if I re-read myself I'm still pretty tired eh

Thanks for reading!

Bye, Emma--

“Don’t you have a gum, please?”

She should've never asked that question. But for her own defense, she had a bad taste in her mouth and it had to go away, really. She'd just spent two absolutely abominable hours of science. She'd tried to escape the classroom when her teacher had announced that, during that session, they would cut open a poor defenseless frog, but she didn't make it through the door without being noticed. Therefore, to put it politely, if right now she didn't get something to change the taste of bile in her mouth, she was really going to vomit everything she'd eaten this morning, and that includes the waffles she gorged herself, much to her dad's disappointment, but also the little snack she took at Benny's. So, after all, asking this was really innocent, it was even a survival matter. But she wasn't expecting him to say *that* .

"Okay, I'll give you one," he paused, and he had a smug look on his face. "But you have to promise that you'll do the dare on it."

Of course he would've had those gums with those stupid dares coming with them, she knew him too well to ever doubt that. She laid against the wall behind her, trying to relax because she was easily unsettled by his handsome looks. She rolled her eyes, reconsidering it for a second but she saw his challenging smirk. She was not one to refuse challenges. Plus, she needed that piece of gum. She closed her dark brown eyes and rolled her eyeballs to the back of her head once again before opening them and locking eyes with her friend, sighing longly. She finally mumbled a sentence.

"Fine, I promise."

How bad could a dare be, right?

mischievous in them. He knew he was right and it was no use saying the contrary. So she simply sighed heavily and pulled on her hair slightly, and with that, she proved him he was right and he threw his fist in the air, silently celebrating his victory, and as he did so, his curls moved along, and it melted her heart a bit more.

But she couldn't let him win for Christ's sake.

"But I'm not gonna tell you." Her tone was firm and she was serious. There was no way she could tell him. He laughed it off.

"That's fine by me, you don't have to tell me El," he stopped briefly, and she smiled when she heard him call her by the nickname *he* had given her. However, her heart dropped when he finished his little speech. "You have to tell your crush. That's all."

El crossed her arms on her chest and lowered her head so she no longer met his gaze and he couldn't see her blush. She was still holding tight on her bag and she was starting to be afraid that she might break it, somehow.

"Yeah, but how do I not tell you if you're actually the one that's concerned?"

For a second, she thought about saying this, but thankfully she'd stopped herself before the words escaped her mouth. And she didn't want to break the news to him like this. Actually, she didn't want to tell him at all. She wanted to disappear in the ground right now, because his leer was too much to bear.

“Mike,” she whispered, “I can’t do it, I’m sorry.”

He pursed his lips, shook his head and for a moment she thought he would be understanding and kind, which he usually was . She nervously chewed on her gum, his before, waiting for his answer. And when he spoke again, her hopes vanished into long lost fantasies.

“You promised, Hopper.” He sighed, before adding, “and you can’t really take it back since you’ve already taken advantage of our little deal.” He concluded as she popped a bubble against her will when he poked her on the cheek.

So that was it now. She was screwed. And this feeling grew even more when she caught him staring at her during lunch with that secret look in his eyes and she stared back too before being pulled by her friend Max because “he looked like a creep”. But El couldn’t help but admit that even when he looked like a creep, he still remained cute.

But she had to keep her promise. Because she wanted a stupid piece of gum. She knew she could have avoided this by asking someone else, there had to be someone else who had gum, but no, she still went for Mike, because it seemed her steps dragged her towards him unconsciously, like a magnet. And, El didn’t know a lot of people, or at least she didn’t talk to a lot of them. She simply trusted Mike so much. She’d known him for so long, and she always thought of him like more than a friend: she liked him. He didn’t know about it, though. And nobody knew, to be honest. She just didn’t want the rumor to spread, it’d be the end of her. Every rumour extending from the school got out of there, inevitably: it’d be a true nightmare. And, she wasn’t that close to Mike. She only knew him because her dad

knew his best friend's mother, and it turns out that he was always over there, at Will's. She would talk to him from time to time but that was it. Well, sure, they had the same friends and were always hanging out together, so maybe this made them friends, but honestly, El was just looking for a reason not to tell him, because she would never dare to tell him her true feelings. But it looked like a gum changed this.

But she certainly didn't want to deal with it right now. It could wait.

That was what she'd told herself, but a certain someone else was not a fan of this idea. At all.

"El," she heard him running after her. It'd been three days since he gave her the gum, and three days since she didn't do the dare. She cursed silently so he couldn't hear when he finally grabbed her arm, still with a jerky breathing from his run. His curls were messed up because it was pouring outside, and his face was red, but he still remained so adorable. He smiled down at her, and she couldn't help but smile back to him, even though she wanted to avoid him at all costs. That had been easy for the past few days because of the weekend. She had made the choice not to go to Will's when her dad went to see his mother. She knew Mike would be there, and she didn't want to appear all flustered in front of her dad and her friends. But now Mike wasn't saying anything, so she assumed it was her turn to do the talking.

"Mike," she simply greeted, and she hoped it wasn't showing that her cheeks were growing hotter and hotter as he stared at her. He didn't respond, but his behavior was clearly indicating that he waited for an answer, and more than a simple 'hi'. Like, maybe he wanted to know if she did the dare. Oh, she was sure that's what he wanted to know. She sighed and looked down to the floor before looking back up at

him —cracking her neck, really—, with that same look in his eyes.

“The answer is no, Mike.”

She heard him mutter “damn it”, but she knew he wouldn’t make it personal. Yet, she knew the storm was coming.

“C’mon Hopper, why?”

Why what? Why she didn’t tell her crush about it? Why she was so scared that she’ll end up being rejected? Because she was a hundred percent sure that her crush wasn’t the least interested in her? Those reasons were why. But she couldn’t tell Mike, because it’d be just like telling her crush and she wasn’t ready for that. Yet. And she was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t hear him talk again until he snapped his fingers right before her eyes, which startled her. She looked daggers at him, her eyes wide open. But Mike didn’t seem to mind that he bothered her because at least, now, he got her attention.

“Since you didn’t listen to a single thing I said, I’m going to make it short: you don’t have anything to be afraid of, but most importantly, you *promised* . And you won’t break a promise, El, won’t you?” His eyes were kind and comforting, and with that look she could only agree to anything he’d say. If he told her to jump off the cliff at the quarry, she would gladly do so. So she obeyed him, without thinking.

“You know I would never do that.” She beamed at him, and he seemed to be more satisfied, but not completely. That’s why she stuttered something without thinking again, but it made him happier, and he finally left not without dwelling longer than he should’ve, and

she was still smiling like an idiot, alone in the hallways. Well, that was before she realized what she'd told him.

She had told him she was going to tell her crush she liked him next time they'll share a class together. That would have been totally fine if she and Mike didn't share a class right at the end of the week. She had to tell him. Or else she would betray herself. El had to find a way to tell him. And fast. She had a week ahead of her.

"Yeah that's Mike, everyone knows."

El went seeking for help to her best friend, Max, whose love life was a bit more exciting than hers, and, she was a girl, so she figured it'd be easier to talk to her about it. She had been planning on asking for advice without revealing a single thing about her crush. And that included his identity —of course— but it seemed like, to quote her friend's words, "everyone knows." Max had said that so nonchalantly, it seemed *normal* to her, but El was terrorised. She couldn't imagine Mike being aware of it and at the same time asking her to admit her crush. That was like torturing her —figuratively speaking—, and maybe he was doing it all so she could admit it to his face and then he could reject her and feel satisfied with himself. Maybe there was no dare at all with the gum, maybe he put a dare there on purpose because he *knew* she would ask for gum because really, it was most likely *him* who'd begged the teacher to do a dissection that day and—ok now she was overreacting and imagining things.

"H-He can't know." That was all she could manage to say, in a broken and scared voice. And Max chortled, not looking up from her comic book.

“God El, when I say everyone, it means our group of friends.” She smirked before going on, “you’re are not very subtle about it, you know.”

Her friend’s words didn’t have the effect she was looking for because El remained totally panicked. She didn’t care that her friends knew. Well, maybe a little bit, but that wasn’t the most urgent thing right now. It seemed like she was about to cry, from stress mainly.

“Max,” her voice was shaken, “he *cannot* know. I’m serious.” She didn’t notice her friend’s head perking up behind the book she was reading. “He must think I’m so weird for acting like this around him and he must want to get rid of me but he must force himself because we have friends in common but I’m sure he hates me an—”

She was silenced by Max’s finger on her mouth. The redhead had a warm smile spreading on her face, which was rare because she liked people to believe she was insensitive to others. She put her hands on her best friend’s shoulders, preventing her from fidgeting anymore.

“Oh, El,” she sighed, “don’t you know you like the most oblivious guy on Earth?”

El wasn’t sure what her friend meant there. Her brows were furrowed together and her best friend understood that she didn’t get it.

“He doesn’t know, El.” The latter let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. Her friend grinned. “He doesn’t have a clue, actually.”

El was truly relieved, she couldn't say the contrary, but it was hard to believe that he didn't actually got a clue. She couldn't help but feel suspicious. She bit her bottom lip, thinking about it, maybe even too hard, because she could feel a light taste of blood on her tongue. She stopped herself, but a question was still on the tip of her tongue, even though she didn't want to bother her best friend who was now fully absorbed by her book again. But her friend eventually noticed the long lasting silence, very unusual from her friend.

"Ask your question, go ahead." She heard her mumble faintly, still clearly concentrated. But El didn't need to be told twice.

"Are you *sure* the guys didn't tell him anything about me liking him?" She was worried to death, and she absolutely needed to know.

"Yep. One hundred percent sure." Max was still detached about this, but her words reassured her friend nonetheless. Well, they did, before she decided to add something else. "Dustin wanted to tell him or set you guys up, but we wouldn't let him, so don't worry."

El didn't know if she should hate Dustin or feel grateful for him —for them— but she was glad they did nothing, and also glad that they cared about El, even though she was absent-minded most of the time. And now her thoughts wandered back to Mike, and she found herself smiling like a fool. Max immediately noticed, because she clapped her hands before her eyes, startling her —it really seemed like people loved to make her jump these days. El groaned in response, and Max grimaced, before she shoved a handful of candies in her mouth.

"Thought you need'd ma help," there was no need to say she didn't

take the time to chew or to close her mouth.

She only sighed in response and then nodded, indicating her that, yes, she was only asking to be helped. She appreciated the fact that her friend agreed to help her, but she didn't know *how* to ask her. She eventually decided to do a little recap of the situation, hoping that her friend would take the initiative to give her the help she needed without necessarily articulating the words. El swallowed her saliva before starting her 'story'.

"I made a bet. And I promised." She lifted her head towards her interlocutor, her eyes wide and panicked. "Max, I'm in deep shit." Her friend only sighed in reply, which lightly vexed El, who was now frowning.

"El, I already told you poker wasn't made for you. Sure, you can have a poker face, I mean that's the whole point of the game but... you simply don't know the rules, actually." The ginger didn't say anything for a while, which left El in misunderstanding, but Max resumed. "It's no use playing and settling bets when you know you'll be losing El, I'm gonna teach you how to play someday 'cause-"

"But what are you talking about?" El really didn't understand a single thing and her friend didn't seem to figure out her reaction either, since she was frowning. Max was about to talk again when she was cut short, once again, to be corrected. "I didn't touch poker since the last time Max, this game... sucks." She crossed her arms firmly against her chest and curled her lips in a pout, and Max laughed in view of her friend who sounded like she didn't enjoy losing.

"Well then, care to explain why you made a bet, huh?" You could sense impatience in Max's voice, who seemed more than annoyed by

her friend who just kept beating around the bush.

El lowered her eyes before answering. “I wanted a chewing-gum...” She furtively raised her head to meet her friend’s gaze who didn’t believe her ears. Everything was about food with El, and she knew it very well. It didn’t prevent her from taking a handful of treats she shoved in her mouth to listen to the rest of her friend’s story, who proceeded, “Mike gave it to me, but there was a dare.” El paused, and Max, showing herself as impatient, motioned with her hands for her to hurry up and finish. “I have to tell him how I really feel about him. I mean, about my crush. I mean, about him, well, you understood.”

She didn’t get any reply from her friend and, not daring to look up after she’d lowered her eyes during her disclosure, she worried more and more. At last, she heard something, but it was not what she expected it to be.

“But, what do you need my help for?”

El was red. Admittedly, Max was her friend but it still embarrassed her to talk about how she felt. She finally plucked up the courage to look her friend in the eyes even though she only wished for a thing: hide in a hole and never get out of it. She gulped and, seeing that her friend was waiting for an answer, and quick, she finally spoke, her voice rather quiet.

“I need you to help me, to tell him.”

She only received a snort from her friend. El didn’t understand: why was her friend offering help if it was only to mock her? Then she

remembered it was her who'd begged her friend, and not the contrary.

In the meantime, Max cooled off, taking breaths to find an even respiration. After one last laugh, she looked at El, earnest, and shook her head.

"Uh-uh, not gonna happen." She saw her friend's outraged look and continued after putting her hands on hers. "Listen El: no, I'm not gonna help you." She sighed, seeing her friend's furrowed brows. She cleared her throat and resumed, "You got into trouble all by yourself, and, plus, I'm not the one in love with Wheeler," she cracked a smile when she saw El trying to hide her redness. She was expecting outcries from her friend, but, much to her surprise, nothing came. She pursued, "also, it may stress him out more than anything if I were there to say everything instead of you. So," she insisted, "if I'm not there, well, at least, you'd be the one telling everything, you see?" She squeezed her friend's hands, as if to show her support and then added, "well, there's also the risk that you won't say anything at all and make a fool of yourself, but you wouldn't give up a dare, right?" With that, she arched a brow, looking at her friend. The latter acquiesced silently, indicating that she understood everything her friend had just said. Max let go of her friend's hands, with an almost forced smile, and took back her comic book, and started reading again. "Now, if you don't mind, I *absolutely* have to finish this volume before Dustin, I have to hurry."

El puffed, let go of all the pressure she had and let herself fall on the fluffy bed as well. "Thanks Max, I think it's gonna be fine." Her voice was monotonous, indicating she wasn't confident, she wasn't reassured, but, so be it, she had to do it.

Many times during the week, she found herself toe to toe with Mike, sometimes even many times a day, and many times, he'd asked her if she had the possibility to tell him, and therefore, it was also many times that she'd told him that, no, she didn't have the occasion to tell her crush. He eventually asked if she really attended a lecture with this person or if she had only said that to get rid of him and thus never fully making the bet. It was with a particular lack of enthusiasm and also a forced smile that she'd answered him that yes, she did attend a class with him during the week. Mike always wished her good luck, always telling her she didn't have anything to worry about, that everything was going to be alright and that this person would be crazy reacting in a bad way if they didn't jump for joy. His words, not hers. It somewhat comforted her a bit, so everytime, she thanked him, all of this while displaying a shy smile. Sometimes, he joined his words with a caress on her arm, aiming at motivating her, or even sometimes he took her in his arms, holding her long enough for her to smell his scent and hear his heart pounding in his chest, but also long enough for her to fear him noticing her sudden heat strokes, or her breathing stop. It had happened, once or twice, but she'd always blamed health issues totally made up on the spot, or she'd blamed the weather when it was freezing outside. There was only once, where, when he pointed out the fact that she was burning up, she dared replying.

"No, you're the room heater."

To which a laugh escaped his lips, and then he'd smiled down at her, always this smile melting her each time. He hadn't replied, but his face spoke volumes. And, before leaving, he dropped a kiss on her scalp.

However, now, the situation was far more critical. She was in class, her science class, and hereby, she was with Mike.

Well, not really.

He was in the first rows, as always, with his partner sitting next to him. El didn't know the guy, but he shouldn't be a bad person because Mike never complained. He was taking notes, just like everybody else did, and furrowed his brows together while doing so. El couldn't help but finding him more adorable. She found herself blushing once again, and, to prevent herself from squealing, she chewed on her pen which really was in pretty bad shape.

She was attempting to take notes, too, but she was way too busy observing him and especially waiting for the moment he would turn around and shoot her a smile of him, even sometimes giving her venturesome winks.

She eventually broke her pen, slightly cutting her lip and couldn't have held back the whimper escaping her lips. Some students turned to the origin of the sound, without ever finding it, but the glare her neighbour shot her convinced her she was probably crazy doing this. She gave her an awkward smile, which only made her classmate sigh, who'd moved her chair, producing a screech which echoed in the entire classroom.

El sighed. She almost didn't write down anything during the entire class and, when usually she would've leant on Mike to give her the missing parts, she highly doubted that he would accept, or even that she'd be bold enough to ask him at all. Because, of course, after those two hours which seemed to never end, she knew Mike would catch her before she'd go too far away to ask her the *thing*. The very thought made her quiver. It was what she dreaded most of this day, so much that she didn't even eat this morning, which made her earn

one of the most surprised look she had ever seen from her dad so far, and it should be noted that Chief Jim Hopper wasn't the kind of person to showcase his emotion through his face. And, without even her noticing, she saw that around her, hubbub was created with all the books closing, the chairs screeching against the wooden floor and the students talking between them: it was the end of the class.

It was also the end of her.

She swallowed her saliva, more or less, and made her retch. El scanned the room and saw Mike wasn't there anymore. Maybe he had something more important to do? She hoped so.

She took all her time packing her things, whereas her teacher grew more and more impatient behind her desk, most certainly wanting to take advantage of her break over a cup of coffee, or maybe a cigarette, or maybe both. She was surely wondering why Jane Hopper was taking that much time leaving her class when usually, she was out as soon as the bell rang. But what she didn't know was that El couldn't risk having her entire break for Mike to ask her questions, or the contrary, for her to end up all alone in the hallway if he decided to flee. Because yes, she was planning on telling him, she'd promised after all, and she couldn't betray him. She couldn't help it. When she finally closed her bag, El could hear a relieved sigh from the woman older than her. She was dragging her feet when she left the room, her professor on her heels, not daring to look up.

She heard the door snap behind her, with the sound of keys closing it to the public, or rather couples preferring classrooms to bathrooms. It distanced her from reality for a moment, but she was quickly brought back. Someone had patted her shoulder.

“El?”

She looked up and saw him here, worryness painted all over his face, but it was fast replaced by a smile when El smiled at him, without even forcing herself. She was right: he was here, he didn't forget, but she didn't hate him though.

“Are you okay?” He was about to ask her something else when he stopped dead. “You're bleeding!” He put his thumb on her lips, wiping away the blood. She was surprised and flustered, but he was too puzzled to see it, his eyes on the dot of blood on his thumb.

“I-It's nothing, I swear,” she attempted a little laugh to relax him and it seemed to work because he lifted his head to lay his eyes on her. Now that his face was back to normal, she was waiting for the question that she wanted to get rid of more than anything. She saw him nod, to show her he'd heard her.

Mike licked his lips rapidly and a smile spread on his face. That was it, it was coming.

“So? Still haven't had the chance to do it?” You could see his teeth. It almost became a little game for him: asking her if she could have confessed her secret, hearing her say that she couldn't have. He just hoped that one day she'd answer him positively.

He had yet to know that today he'd get his answer.

When she did nothing but shake her head, he laughed nervously. He should've known, it was his fault if he put too much hope in El. But he didn't stop there, no, he went on with his usual question.

"You didn't have any class with him, El? Don't tell me this is a guy you only have one class in common El..." He sighed, feigning irritation, but she knew it was all for fun.

To answer both of his questions, she shyly shrugged, not really ready yet to get the words out of her mouth. Mike had his eyes wide, mouth open and eyebrows raised.

"You had a class with him and you didn't go and talk to him?" She nodded, holding onto her bag's strap as if it were the only thing keeping her alive or in that case, keeping her from running off. He seemed disappointed now, but he resumed. "Go and catch that guy, and tell him how you really feel about him, El. A bet's a bet, and, El," he paused. He had that gaze she couldn't describe laying on her like a silk sheet. He gulped and went on, stumbling somewhat on the words, "El, I can assure you that, that, that whoever it is, this person won't reject you." He chuckled, which made her melt. "He'd be stupid to do that." He smiled down at her, his eyes were shimmering. "Go find him and tell him, El, go." His smile didn't meet his eyes this time, but El didn't notice because, her head lowered, she was wondering why he was so bent on her telling how she truly feels to a guy he didn't even suspect being himself. If he insisted that much, there was no doubt he didn't want her. Upon this realization, she swallowed back tears which had started accumulating in the corner of her eyes. He couldn't see them, under any circumstances. But she had to face the challenge, even if it was going to leave her in pieces.

El took a deep breath and then raised her head towards him, who was still watching her with that same look she couldn't put a word

on. She wore a smile, to make him believe everything was alright, that she was alright, especially to convince herself rather than him. She took the time to admire his black curls, which were more or less curly depending on the weather. Today, his curls were out of control, because of the humidity. He tended to hate when his hair did that, he usually hid it under a beanie, but today he couldn't have, the downpour had come unexpected. Then, she laid her eyes on his, getting lost into them and their color, so warm and welcoming. Here, there was something more in his eyes but, just like many things today, she couldn't put her finger on it. To avoid appearing strange, she started looking at his freckles. He had often been mocked because of those, but she never understood why: they were similar to a starry sky where she'd certainly journey. She refrained her hand from touching them; as always, she will only feel them with her eyes. Next, she observed his nose, still covered with tiny freckles, but eventually spotted his faint mustache and the beard he probably didn't got the time to shave this morning. And finally, her stare lingered on his lips, that he was in fact licking, surely anticipating her answer. She had to answer him.

She sniffled lightly. "I don't want to ruin our friendship." Now, she was smiling at him, and the tears were more and more threatening to leave the place where they had been kept.

After her simple sentence, he hastened to reply. "I'm not the one you should tell El, I," he stopped and chuckled nervously. "It's him, it's him you have to tell, El." He had taken her hand. His palm was sweaty, just as hers. El looked at both of their hands holding. A chill ran down her spine. And, she thought that him too, because he shivered. She mustered the courage to look at him in the eyes once again and, after he'd also laid eyes on her, she opened her mouth, not without being scared of what was going to happen afterwards.

"That's it." She squeezed his hand wrapping hers. She took a deep breath. "It's done, I just told him." *I just told you* . She saw how his

mouth opened as if to reply something, but nothing came. She also saw how his eyes widened, his eyebrows arched, almost leaving his forehead. Her smile broke, as much as she tried to hold it and, feeling a teardrop rolling down her cheek, she lowered her head and let go of Mike's hand, turned tails holding her bag firmly against her chest while her tears couldn't stick to the edge of her eyes.

She felt free, but also shattered.

She went to eat on her own after that, and had spent the weekend alone, once again staying home while her dad had announced he was heading to Joyce's. She suspected them to have a kind of affair since, that time, he even spent the night there. She didn't resent him: at least, her dad had someone after the loss of her mother, and she was truly happy for him. Someone had attempted to call her on the phone, many times, and she knew oh so well who was at the other end of the device, so she'd unplugged it, and plugged it back when her dad had come back.

When the week of class had started, she'd told her dad she didn't feel well, buying her some more days without having to face Mike. Of course, it didn't prevent the phone from ringing, it made it worse actually, so, she locked herself in her room, listening to the same tape over and over again, it was the only one she had, the one *he* had made her.

Everything. Everything came back to him.

When she had to get back to school, her dad now almost insensitive

to her eyes' charm, she had done everything to avoid him, insisting with Max to eat out everyday, that meant either at Benny's or with their own meals. Of course, he wasn't the only reason, although being the main one, but it's simply that she was seeking a way out of school by all means necessary. She couldn't help throwing up or envying the couples getting together in the run-up of the stupid homecoming. Some dudes went as far as hiring the marching band so they could do their little act during lunch. Didn't they have any respect? People were eating for the love of God.

El had begged Max not to talk to her about Mike, even if sometimes, the redhead couldn't help telling her how worried he was and asked a lot of questions to know if she was alright. Max knew El had told him how she felt, but only because she'd told her. Mike hadn't talked about it, and she could only feel reassured that he kept this secret. Well, this may be embarrassing to him.

During her science class, she always looked in the direction of Mike, but looked away when he turned to her —way too often for her liking. She always earned twisted looks from her classmate next to her but didn't really pay attention.

Sometimes she'd run into him in the hallways, but she always found a way to escape when she saw him approach. Sometimes she saw his face fall.

When will he understand that she didn't want to see him? That she didn't want him to turn her down nicely?

This situation went on for weeks.

But now, she was home, still alone because her father was spending time at Joyce's. As always, she had unplugged the phone, to not be bothered by phone calls, now become less persistent. She had offered Max to come over but she had to decline: tonight, there was the stupid homecoming dance, and her friend went with Lucas. El was hardly surprised, she saw it coming, they were sneaking around since the dawn of time.

El was lying down on her bed and chewed on a waffle, this would be her dinner. *Can't Fight This Feeling* from REO Speedwagon echoed in her headphones, half on her ears. She listened to the song even though she wasn't really in the mood. It reminded her a certain person, the same person who made her the tape. She felt like she was a wreck, there, lying in the old shirt formerly belonging to her father. Her hair went back to being wild curls, considering that she didn't intend to go out today. What's next? Wearing a dress that would itch? Ending up in the middle of pimply teenagers sucking each other's faces? No way. Even the thought of it disgusted her.

Maybe she could've gone, to the dance, but only with one person, that's all. He would've been enough for her to forget everything going on around her. He was *enough* .

She swallowed. No. She shouldn't think about it, she shouldn't think about him when he didn't even care a bit for her and simply wanted to tell her in person, because he wanted to be nice, when it would only do more harm than good.

She had to stop thinking about it, she had to stop over-thinking. It was only Mike, she could avoid him, she could deal with it.

But it was *Mike* .

She shook her head, chasing away her last thoughts.

She had finished her waffle, therefore she could only bring herself to nibble her lips. Just like she used to do way too often lately.

Then, without her expecting it, someone knocked on her door. She eliminated the possibilities in her mind.

Not her dad, he was at Joyce's, and slept there now. He had told her actually. And she knew it wasn't him because firstly, he had his keys with him —she saw him take them after he'd kissed her goodbye—and, secondly, it wasn't the way he used to knock.

Not Max. She was at the dance and El knew she would seize this moment: El had kept on telling her everything was going to be alright, that she would spend the evening alone and that no, she won't go with them because she didn't want to be the third wheel. And especially, she didn't want to risk seeing him. Because, who knows, he must've invited another girl since then. She'd rather not really think about it.

She didn't see anybody else show up to her house at this hour. Sure, it was only a little over eight o'clock on a saturday night, but it was pitch black. As she was still pondering, another knock was heard, this time only a tad more insistent and hurried. Groaning, she muttered a "enough, I'm coming," while biting a brand new waffle who came straight out of the toaster.

She slowly opened the door, and, as it was ajar, she finally caught sight of the mysterious character standing behind it. And it was Mike. By reflex, she crushed her waffle in her hand as a high-pitched scream came out of her throat before slamming the door in his face.

What was he doing out there? Why wasn't he at school? What was he doing in the doorway?

She was clinging to the door, from behind, and was breathing with slight uneasiness. Through the wood, she could hear Mike gently dragging his hand against it. However, it didn't seem like he was moving from his spot anytime soon. Bloody hell, so she will never get rid of him, that's it?

She did not say a thing, he was the one talking.

"El..." his voice was muffled by the piece of wood separating them. "El... I," he paused and she could hear take a deep breath. "I know you've been avoiding me since last time," ah! he wasn't even naming this event! Well, she wouldn't dare to too. He went on, "but, you really have no reason to avoid me, none, I promise." To these words, she turned around and had her ear against the door, to hear him better. On the other side, he rested his hand and forehead against it. She heard him clear his throat. "I've got a little something for you. So please, open the door so I can at least give it to you."

And then, her hand, who had moved to the handle, lowered it and pulled on the door so that she could place her face between the door and the wall. There, she dared to look at him. He smiled shyly and she couldn't help smiling too. After all those weeks without seeing him —or barely—, and, although she recalled every single freckle and their spot, seeing his face once again from her own eyes was way

better than seeing it in her mind. And, without paying attention, she opened the door a bit more, allowing her body to pass through the doorway, and she was on her own doorstep.

Reflexively, her hands found her arms, rubbing them. We were in december. It was cold outside, right. She exhaled, which made fogging come out of her mouth. She saw Mike on the verge of taking off his jacket to offer it to her, but she refused with a simple head motion, and so, he put it back on, not without taking something out of its pocket. A piece of gum.

She snorted.

“Again?” Those were the first words she had told him for weeks, and they’d come naturally.

“I think you’ll like it,” he ensured her with a grin, but added in extremis, “well, I-I hope so!” He wetted his lips, probably from anticipation as she’d seen him do so many times before. Oh, right, it was her turn.

Carefully, she opened the packet, which was untouched at first glance. Inside, she found a gum but also a small piece of paper. She got scared, slightly, and looked at him with panic in her eyes.

“Mike, it’s really not funny I-” She was cut sharply.

“Read it. This one’s different.” He attempted to comfort her with a

smile, and strangely, it worked, not without creating a certain movement in her belly, a pleasant feeling.

She proceeded as her heart felt like it was going to jump out of her chest. She unfolded the paper and immediately recognized his handwriting and she couldn't help smiling. After she had unfolded it completely, she started aloud.

“ *I dare you to be my date for the homecoming dance* . Mike I,-” She stopped and laughed nervously. “That’s not even a question.”

He firmly shook his head. “Nope, no no no no, unless you don’t want to and in that case I totally understand but I-”

“Mike, I, I’d love to,” wow, she’d said it, “I’d love to go with you but it’s tonight, you know, the dance,” she dwelled on the end of the word. She couldn’t believe that these very sentences were coming out of her mouth. It was as if she was on autopilot.

“Well, it was planned a while ago but *someone* had decided to ignore me.” Ouch, ok, she may have screwed it up.

Knowing it was a lost cause, and that it was partly —well not only partly— her fault, she did not reply to this affront. However, after she cleared her throat, she gave him an answer.

“About that Mike...” she lowered her eyes. If he’d planned to do that a while ago, it must have hurt him that she spent her time avoiding

him. She took a deep breath before continuing. "I'm sorry, i-in my mind you just wanted to tell me face to face that the two of us wasn't gonna happen, and that what I felt for you was one-sided. So..." But she came to a realization: he never said he was interested in her. Who knows, maybe it was one of his lousy dare once again. She had to get to the bottom of this. "Well, maybe it is by the way." She was slightly shaking, and she was squeezing the invisible string she had made up so hard that her nails were piercing the skin of her hand, but she didn't really pay attention to it. She only heard a breath coming from him. That made her look up at him.

"El, I-" he looked her right in the eyes, more serious than ever, but also anxious. "Let it be clear between us: when I saw you for the first time at Will's while you had just moved in the middle of nowhere that's Hawkins," they both chuckled at that, perfectly tuning together, "I've always wanted to know more about you, have more, I-, you can ask Will! I annoyed him so much with my questions, but he didn't know more or less than me," he laughed, even if he wasn't reassured to admit all of this: it was to relax him, probably. El was just as stressed out as he was to be completely honest. She put a stop to her thoughts to listen, his voice putting her at peace in this moment she would have never thought she'd go through ten minutes ago. "H-He had to ask his mother and she had told him it was not polite to snoop into people's life like that, and so he told me the same thing but I-I don't know, I needed to know." He exhaled, and talked again immediately. "Okay, no, hum, it was weird I-, well, listen: you intrigue me El, it has always been the case and, I want to know you El. More. More than that. I," he paused and put his hand behind his neck, right where his curls emerged. El guessed his anxiety, which pushed her to hold back a smile threatening to curl her lips. No, she wasn't making fun of him, she was over the moon. But she remembered he wasn't finished yet, and then, she focused on him again, who kept trying to find his words. After a throat was being cleared, he continued, at last, she told herself. "I want to know you better. Know you but not only as a simple friend, or else. No El, I'd like to try something with you, something romantically speaking." *Romantically* .

This word, it meant everything right? He... perhaps, yes. A smile appeared on her face, and she didn't intend to move it. No, she couldn't even if she tried to. She was bubbling over with joy, she was about to explode, she-

She was brought back to Earth.

"El, please, answer me."

It was almost plaintive.

Answer. Answer. Answer. She had forgotten how to answer. She had forgotten how to speak.

Without thinking, she dangerously came closer to Mike. To him. Closer. To his face. Closer. To his lips. Closer.

She couldn't get any closer, her lips were on his.

It was sweet, this kiss had waited so damn long, had been imagined so many times in their heads.

She felt Mike move his lips against hers, and his hand resting on her hip. She liked it, and, feeling the urgent need to draw closer to him—because after all, it was possible—, one of her hands went behind

his neck, running her fingers in his hair and the other, which at first touched his arm with her fingertips, grasped it at last, but not too much; just enough. He was her anchor.

Mike's other hand found her cheek, where his thumb caressed her cheekbone. She smiled against his lips at the gesture, and he did too.

She didn't believe it, but the lack of air made the thing more real, the heat, the touch. *Him* .

At some point, they came apart. Both of them were gaping, surprised even. Why did they wait? A silence settled between them, but it was far from being awkward. This silence, it was them becoming aware of what had just happened. Mike eventually broke this silence.

"El," oh gosh, how red he was. Well, she may not look any better. "Do you think we could get going?"

She laughed. Not in a mean way, no, she simply thought he was funny. She chewed on her lip and pulled on the hem of her tee-shirt.

"Mike, I don't even have a dress, I've got nothing. I look like a mess, my hair is... curly," she showed them very rarely in their natural condition.

Now, it was her turn to only have a laugh. Mike ran his fingers in her curls. "So what? There's no need. El, I swear, you're gorgeous the way you are." His thumb stroked her cheek and a smile curled her

lips, almost big enough to touch his finger. His other hand took hers, whereas the one on her cheek lifted up her chin so that his eyes met hers. “Ready?”

She blushed, like crazy actually, but she didn’t really have to hide anymore. Mike too wasn’t in a tux like we could think every high schooler would be. He was dressed just as usual. A sweater —that she might steal from him—, a shirt, his windbreaker and a pair of pants. He was right, what was the point? She smiled at him timidly.

“I guess.”

He took her with him, turning to her and smiling. She hung onto him when he pedaled on his bike, the december breeze freshening up her cheeks. She nuzzled her nose in his neck and attempted to get warmer like that, knowing she couldn’t avoid the inevitable. She would most likely catch a cold but she didn’t care. Now, all of this didn’t really matter.

She knew she had him, just as he had her. That was enough for her at that moment.